

The Moravian Experience in the New World

The *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren), commonly referred to as Moravians (as a number of the members came from Moravia), was one of the earliest Protestant religious groups established in central Europe, in the 15th century. During the next 200 years, however, the Moravians endured religious persecution for their beliefs. When John Hus, the founder of the Unity of Brethren was martyred, the Moravians commenced to practice their religion in secret. Eventually, in the early 18th century, the Moravians found a protector in a Saxon nobleman, Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf. The Brethren established a congregation town called Herrnhut, on the count's estate of Wachovia. There they were able to practice their tenets of communal living, non-violence, and promotion of their faith through missionary work.

Throughout the first half of the 18th century, the Moravians worked with sympathetic European governments to establish missionary colonies for the conversion of Eskimos in

Greenland, Bushmen in South Africa, and enslaved Africans on the Danish Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. Undoubtedly, their most well known efforts were the creation of Moravian congregations in the North American British colonies of Pennsylvania and North Carolina. In Moravian-founded frontier colonial towns, like Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Salem, North Carolina, the Brethren's communal efforts resulted in planned communities whose industries and skilled craftsmen produced the necessities (including iron, pottery, farm implements, distilled liquors, shoes, finished lumber, and processed grains) for a growing American population.

The Moravians' communal approach to living was based on the social concept of *Oeconomy*, whereby the church elders planned economic development within the Moravian-founded towns. The Brethren were utopian in their beliefs, but were also practical in their everyday lives as their church and its programs were supported by sale of Moravian-produced goods to

Rear view of the Single Brothers House (1768), located in the Old Salem Historic District (Winston-Salem, North Carolina). The Single Brothers House, a National Historic Landmark, was originally used as a trade school for Moravian boys and as a dormitory for craftsmen and apprentices. Today, it holds the administrative offices of Old Salem Incorporated. Photo by the author.



non-Moravians, or Strangers. Moreover, non-Moravians were welcome in the Moravian towns and often worked in church-sponsored industries.

As long as the Moravians were the dominant economic and demographic force in their towns, they were able to control the communities of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Salem, North Carolina. However, a growing non-Moravian population in these communities engendered competition, and the church suspended the *Oeconomy* rule in 1802. The church did continue many of its industries and it planned the development of lands acquired in the mid-18th century well into the late 19th century. As a result, in places like Bethania, North Carolina, the town plan, cemetery, and most of the individual garden plots, farmsteads, and wood lots are preserved down to the present day.

Concern for the preservation of Moravian resources began in the 1950s, as a joint Moravian church and private preservation effort to acquire and restore individual buildings in Bethlehem and Salem (now called Old Salem). Many of these properties (Old Salem Historic District, Single Brothers House, Salem Tavern, Gemeinhaus-De Schweintz Residence) were recognized by the National Park Service as National Historic Landmarks for their historic and architectural significance in the 1970s.

Recently, the Southeast Regional Office of the National Park Service began to re-assess the contribution of the Moravians to the history of the United States, by looking at Moravian resources from new perspectives. As a result, Bethabara—an archeological site—was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1999, as the pioneering site from which the Moravian land grant of Wachovia evolved into the town of Salem, North Carolina, with smaller farming communities such as Bethania (1759). The site of Bethabara was also determined to be of national significance for its “ground breaking” contribution, in the 1960s, to development of historical archeology.

The Old Salem landmark district, designated in 1966 for its architectural significance, is currently being re-studied with assistance from the North Carolina Historic Preservation Office to look beyond just the architectural Moravian heritage of the 18th century. Consideration is being given to the examination of the larger planned community of Old Salem, which includes the sites of industrial complexes, the

contemporary African-American Moravian community, the Moravian cemetery, and a recognition of Moravian importance into the late 19th century. A joint effort between the National Park Service and the North Carolina Historic Preservation Office was the development of a Landmark nomination for Bethania, a mid-18th-century Moravian planning farming community which has retained its town and farm lot plan nearly intact up to the present day.*

In order to more fully understand the contribution of the Moravian church and people to the United States, the Southeast Regional Office and its preservation partners are beginning to look at the significance of the Moravian church in an expanded geographic framework. Prior to arriving in North America, the Moravians first settled in the Danish (now American) Virgin Islands, where they converted large numbers of enslaved Africans, whose descendants still worship in historic Moravian churches, built with the profits of Moravian-run sugar plantations on these islands.

The Moravians could not advocate abolition of slavery either in the Danish Virgin Islands or North Carolina, due to the then current political realities of the 18th and 19th centuries. They did, however, do missionary work among enslaved Africans in both areas and provided them with many civil and religious opportunities to better their lives. In the Virgin Islands, prior to the 1848 Emancipation, the Moravians, working with the Danish government, built schools and educated the children of slaves in anticipation of the end of slavery. Numerous Moravian-related cultural properties in the Virgin Islands have been identified and the Southeast Region is in discussions with that Preservation Office to develop a long range program of recognition and preservation of these important cultural properties.

It is anticipated that the full story of the contribution of the Moravian church and communities will continue to be re-examined and new resources will be identified as the approach to preservation itself changes.

Note

- * On August 7, 2001, the Secretary of the Interior designated Bethania as a National Historic Landmark.

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